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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the status of parents in the developmental assessment process and considers how involving parents jointly with the professional to assess their young child may yield more accurate and valuable information. The paper explores the use of a mediated learning experience (MLE) approach as a framework for increasing support for parental involvement in the assessment process. It is suggested that changes occurring in a child's environment are potentially effective if these changes include learning experiences mediated by an adult. Criteria of mediated learning experiences are described: intentionality and reciprocity, transcendence, meaning, feelings of competence, self-regulation, sharing behavior, individuation and psychological differentiation, goal planning, challenge, and self-change. Nine cases of children's behavior, ranging from separation anxiety to avoidance of school tasks, were discussed by 25 Singapore parents working in groups in a 3-day workshop to introduce the concepts of MLE and their relationship to behavior identification and management. One case is highlighted as an example. The paper notes that the Singapore parents identified academic tasks as major concerns in their daily mediational activities. The paper concludes by noting that the approach to assessment presented here has implications for working with parents and for training of professionals who work with them. (KB)

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Parental Involvement in Child Assessment: A Dynamic Approach

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Parental Involvement in Child Assessment: A Dynamic Approach (SEN 01364)

Initiatives in intervention programs for young children have strongly recommended that parents be involved in the assessment process. This is to contribute toward a more accurate diagnosis of and prescription for the developmental progress of the child. Child assessment has been an area in which the specialist retains strong professional control but a focus on parental involvement in assessment today is timely for ethical, theoretical and practical considerations where the parental role can be expanded. The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of a dynamic approach or the mediated learning experience theory (Feuerstein 1980) as a framework which underlies the parental role in the assessment process. This dynamic procedure places great importance on the pretest/mediation/posttest model and is based on ten experiential criteria. (Tzuriel, 1997). It is hoped that this study will stimulate further research on how parents' competence as a mediator of learning and social experience can be enhanced. A case study of parents assessing their children at home will be examined and discussed. A variety of issues concerning dynamic assessment for older children and the training of professionals who work with families will be explored .

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Parental Involvement in Child Assessment: A Dynamic Approach

Early child intervention studies have provided strong evidence that specific activities of parents relate to their child's cognitive development. (Bloom, 1964; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Research data shows a high correlation between a child's early family environment and his/her later cognitive performance. The effects of early environment may be particularly strong but for some children, later environmental factors may explain more of the variability in cognitive performance than do the effects of the early environment. Nevertheless, assessment and intervention which takes into account the parent-child relationship is timely today for both theoretical and practical reasons.

It is well understood that the development of the child does not occur in isolation and family perspectives on a child's social and emotional development, for example can contribute to a fuller and accurate picture of the child's growing needs. Professionals who assess children have typically believed that parents lack the appropriate expertise to assess their children. Parents are perceived to be relatively biased in their observations which are highly in favor of their children. Such beliefs have influenced research which documented the reliability and the validity of the intervention studies rather than the complementarity of parental involvement towards the assessment effort. The role of parents in child assessment can be expanded. This role is dictated by individual differences in families and children. The nature and extent of parental involvement may vary according to parenting styles, attitudes, competence, motivation and values.

Parents and professional can concur highly in their assessment when both share an identical or highly similar assessment task and when the behaviors observed are firmly established. Both parents and professionals can assess the child at different times and in different settings. In this case, parental reports may be most useful when it complements, rather than duplicates formal assessments. Based on their experience and relationship with the child, each parent brings an unique perspective to the assessment results.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the status of parents in the assessment process and at where a joint assessment with the professional may yield more accurate and valuable information about the child. It explores the use of a mediated learning experience approach as a framework for increasing support for parental involvement in the assessment procedure. It is suggested that changes occurring in a child's environment are potentially effective if these changes include learning experiences mediated by an adult. (Mediated Learning Experiences, MLE). In an MLE interaction, parents interpose themselves between a set of stimuli and the child with the objective of modifying the stimuli for the developing child. (Feuerstein et.al., 1980). The mediator modifies the stimuli by changing their frequency, order, intensity and context; by arousing the child's curiosity and perceptual acuity; and by trying to improve or create in the child the cognitive functions required for temporal, spatial and cause-effect relationships. (Tzuriel, 1999).

The meaning of Mediated Learning Experience

The concept of mediated learning experience, as described by Feuerstein (1980) focuses on the child's ability to learn from experiences that are facilitated by the parent or any caregiver. In a family setting, the types and nature of parent-child relationships form an important framework for the professional to examine the history of interactions in the family. This view of parental involvement is in accordance with the Piagetian constructivist concept of development in which the child's knowledge of reality comes from his actions on objects. In this relationship, many interactions are with the inanimate world. The child constructs reality and Piaget mentioned the need for mediation leading to the formation of logico-mathematical processes, but he did not elaborate on the characteristics of this mediation to be provided by the adult member.

This view has been contrasted with that of Vygotsky (1978) who emphasized the effects of socialization on child development, especially parent to child communication of culture. Vygotsky offered the notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to explain this process of cognitive growth. In Vygotsky's own words the ZPD is: "the distance between actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." Children can usually produce behaviors at a more advanced cognitive level when they are assisted. Many of these skills can best be observed when the child is interacting with a familiar caregiver, typically the parent.

Feuerstein developed the LPAD (Learning Potential Assessment Device) as a method of assessing the modifiability of a child's intelligence by assessing the child's ZPD. This paradigm is frequently referred to as a "test-teach-retest" paradigm (or pretest/mediation/posttest model). The first test is the assessment of the initial development level, the teaching portion of the assessment allows the child to benefit from the coaching and guidance of the parent, and the final portion of the assessment measures the developmental level reached as a result of "mediating". The distance (gain) between first and second tests then serves as an estimate of the child's modifiability. A "gainer" would be a child with a large difference between initial scores and second tests.

According to Feuerstein (1980), the concept of mediated learning focuses on the child's ability to learn from experiences that are facilitated by the caregiver or parent. The parent mediates, or comes between, the child and the environment. The parent provides focus, intentional learning experiences, interpretations and reinforcements during interactions. According to Carnahan and Simeonsson (1992) these parental functions for promoting learning in early childhood are so important that cognition cannot be accurately assessed without such dynamic interactions. Feuerstein emphasizes the parent's mediational role in explaining the large individual differences in children's social and cognitive behavior.

There are many applications for the MLE concept to a variety of settings and to many different need systems. These include;

a) an assessment of learning and cognitive functioning (eg LPAD)
b) teaching pre-requisite and foundational thinking skills and strategies (eg Instrumental Enrichment program)
c) training of parents and teachers to more effectively interact with, teach, and address various developmental problems
d) enhancing the learning potential of their children.

Feuerstein has summarized this latter activity as an effort to 'shape modifying environments' and has developed parent education materials directed toward this end eg Guidelines for Parents. (Feuerstein and Minsker, 1993). Other practitioners have become familiar with Feuerstein's concepts, understand the power and function of MLE, and have developed adaptations of the mediational approach to child development and parenting skills for example, in Israel Pnina Klein's More Intelligence and Sensitive Child program for infant and early childhood; in the United States Katherine Greenberg's Cognet program for parents and teachers of early elementary age children, the work of Ruth Kahn and Carol Lidz on developing parent mediation interventions; M.R.Jensen's Parent as Mediator program; and the work in South Africa of Mervyn Skuy and his team on developing MLE training materials for working with parents.

MLE criteria

For mediation to occur, certain criterial parameters of an interaction must be present. Falik (1997) noted that all parenting and teaching interactions are not mediation, but all can be if they encompass these qualities. And to the extent that the parent broadens his or her repertoire, and uses the criterial characteristics consistently, mediational objectives will be realized. More importantly, once identified they can be taught, acquired and practiced, and incorporated into daily and routine interactions in the home or classroom. In the case of particular needs of children to develop or remediate behaviorial capacities, they can be directed toward the provision of intensive, systematic and repetitive experiences.

The criteria of MLE are briefly described as follows, with each lending themselves to a wide variety of specific behavioural responses and interventions to create conditions of learning and the development of skills.

INTENTIONALITY and RECIPROCITY

This quality insures that interactions have a purpose and that the child understands the reasons for behavioral expectations and the intervention of the mediator. The child is then encouraged to respond accordingly, and the expectations and responses are clearly identified according to their reasons and functions for the child.

TRANSCENDENCE

This entails going beyond the immediate interaction to connect the behavior to goals, directions, future events and expectations. It is an answer to the question of why we are doing something now and how it relates to where we are going or want to go with our skills, experience and expectations. The mediator orients responses toward this end and the child comes to understand and incorporate it in immediate experience.

MEANING

This occurs when the parent or teacher conveys to the child the importance and relevance of the activity, identifying its mutual value and importance and investing it with emotional significance and acceptance. Meaning is experienced when the goals, projects, feelings and actions are validated and affirmed, in a genuine way, and that is assimilated into the learner's sense of self.

FEELINGS OF COMPETENCE

Mediators create conditions and provide opportunities for acquisition of skills that develop in the child a positive belief in his/her ability to succeed, overcome difficulties and appreciate existing skills and abilities. The mediator guides the child through these experiences and provides feedback and encouragement to reinforce both feelings of success and investment in the world of activity.

SELF-REGULATION and CONTROL OF BEHAVIOR

The mediator makes the child aware of the need to monitor behavior and adjust responses to the reality of situations and effects on self and others. It may take the form of specific skills and concrete experiences, or at the level of insight and understanding (the latter being the most effective for structural change and long term development).

SHARING BEHAVIOR

This criteria emphasizes the value and need for cooperation and interaction with others. Listening to another's point of view, being sensitive to the feelings of others, participating with others in collaborative activities, and making others participate with the child are examples of sharing behavior.

INDIVIDUATION and PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION

Emphasizes the uniqueness and valued differences between human beings, realistically and genuinely acknowledging independence and diversity. Again, through creating conditions of acceptance and appreciation of difference, and through exposure to specific tasks and experiences, the individual is taught to view her/himself as a separate entity with personal responsibility and the capacity to achieve personal values.

GOAL PLANNING

This criteria involves creating a state of need, helping the child to identify relevant and appropriate goals to strive for, and plan how to achieve them. It also involves monitoring progress to determine if goals have been met. In functional terms, mediation is directed toward setting priorities, gathering data, evaluating success and failure, and encouraging perseverance with projects and commitments.

CHALLENGE

With the mediator's support and encouragement, the child confronts new and unfamiliar situations, develops both skills and feelings of success, and is encouraged to expand perspectives of activity. The mediator arouses in the child interest, readiness, and curiosity about the unknown. The excitement, stimulation and potentialities for further exploration and investment are identified, normalized and used as the stimulus for continued activities.

SELF-CHANGE

This quality acknowledges the potential for and importance of changes that the child can make. The child's optimistic tendencies and independent and autonomous capacities are stimulated and reinforced by the mediator's actions. The mediator instills a belief in the child that change can and will occur, and creates both conditions and specific activities to nurture the belief system.

The first three MLE criteria of intentionality/reciprocity, transcendence and meaning are considered "universal" in that they must be present to some degree for an interaction to be "mediation". The remaining criteria are more "situational" in that they will be present differentially according to the specific tasks, experiences and situations that the individual encounters. These criteria have been elaborated by Klein and Feuerstein (1985) and labeled "potent factors" in adult-child interactions. It is possible that individual differences in the parents' mediational competence may parallel the level of their interest in participating in the assessment process

CASE STUDIES FROM SINGAPORE

A three day workshop in Singapore conducted by Louis Falik based on Feuerstein's MLE principles was held for 25 parents who were introduced to the concepts of MLE and their relationship to behavior identification and management. This included an introduction to the theory of structural cognitive modifiability (SCM) the differences between direct and mediated learning experiences (MLE), and the relationship between MLE, SCM and the development of cognitive functions and social learning behavior in children. This was followed by a discussion and demonstration of various specific techniques of mediation – questioning and interaction techniques, dimensions of structural learning experiences, explaining and elaborating children's behaviorial responses and bridging to further experiences.

Parents were then engaged in an activity which enabled them to practise the model and begin developing mediational skills by:

1. identifying a behavior that they wish to modify.
2. identifying the cognitive and behaviorial functions embedded in the behaviour, both with regard to presence and absence and the phases of functioning involved (input, elaboration and output).
3. determining the primary and secondary mediational objectives to be achieved .

4 planning the specific targeted behavior to which mediation will be directed and
5 identifying one or more specific interventions to be used to accomplish the goals.

A planning worksheet was provided and parents work in groups to develop their mediational intervention plans. These were discussed within the working groups and they then shared with the rest in the workshop. The following problem case studies were identified within the working groups. The LPAD was used as the assessment task.

Case 1: Tantrum, attention-seeking behavior
Case 2: Obsessional behavior- focusing on spinning objects and not attending to other more relevant stimuli
Case 3: Separation anxiety
Case 4: Avoidance of school tasks
Case 5: Verbal communication problems
Case 6: Resistance to writing tasks, with resistance and manipulative behavior when worked with
Case 7: Off task behavior in the classroom
Case 8: Selective task rejection
Case 9: Inability to focus.

The working groups carefully described what the child did and did not do related to the identified problems (using the cognitive functions as a basis for description), they clarified what behavioral changes they wanted to institute, and worked out detailed plans for what to mediate, when and how to mediate, and the range of activities and mediational responses anticipated to affect change in the child's problem behavior. The following is a brief reference to Case 4.

Case 4: Avoidance of school tasks- completing homework.

MLE Criteria	What is Mediated	How it is mediated
Intentionality/ Reciprocity	Having child identify the problem,recognize a problem to be solved (elaboration)	Create signals for child to start task remove distraction, create clear starting and stopping task.
Transcendence	Show how achieving success relates to other aspects of school/home satisfaction	Bridging to other activities where completing tasks helps achieve positive outcomes
Meaning	Get clear perception of need for and value of task completion (input)	Validate meaning of home work, positive outcomes when it is completed, role of tasks in other family members' lives.

Competence	Help child use existing skills to complete tasks	Coaching, teaching, reinforcing past success, identifying newly acquired skills.
Goal setting/ Planning/ Achieving	Precision and accuracy in response	Selecting time duration and outcomes indicators,showing enthusiasm, praise, encouragement, reviewing progress.

The parents were reminded of the following features in the dynamic assessment process:

-child's current level of acquired knowledge and skills
-child's preferred learning styles
-state of child's cognitive processes
-child's motivation to cooperate.

These factors interact dynamically eg preferred learning styles will reflect the level of development of the child's cognitive processes, current skills as well as child's affective/motivational state. As a result, the parent develops a close relationship with the child, attempting to teach basic concepts and skills to clarify the demands of the task even as an estimate of the child's responsiveness to instruction is derived. (Gamlin and Luther, 1992).

Implications

Parents in Singapore identified academic performance oriented tasks as major concerns in their daily mediational activities. They put a major stress on the need for their children to successfully compete in later academic and adult world. From this perspective, it is important to determine that the parents are interpreting the world to the child if they are involved in the child's assessment efforts. Children in Singapore are often reared with the help of grandparents and other family members who seldom have a defined role in assessment and intervention. Before the child is able to speak, his/her parents have already been providing MLEs informally in the home. It is necessary that a parent's competence as a mediator of learning and social experiences be properly assessed through parental observation and training. Watching parents interact with their children can tell us much about both.

This approach has also implications for the training of professionals who work with families. Carnahan and Simeonson (1992) noted that training of professional must include an emphasis on observation and assessment of social interactions, and an understanding of the parent's role in mediating the child's learning experiences. They need to develop a greater responsivity to individual differences in parents' desires and

capability for involvment in the assessment process. Hopefully, this will lead to a greater respect for the child in the family context.

Dynamic assessment has been perceived, according to Tzuriel (1997) by practitioners and researchers as a promising diagnostic procedure that reveals important aspects of an individual's functioning that cannot be revealed by standardized assessment procedures. It is a powerful intervention procedure combined with assessment and which offers parents, teachers and educators an optimistic view of the child as a problem-solving thinker. The child should be seen as modifiable and this modifiability depends on the role of parents as mediating agents. This stance is supported by the theoretical views of Vygotsky and Feuerstein which focus on the socio-cultural roots of intelligence.

The dynamic assessment approach is still young and there are problems in the way. It certainly requires lots of skill and a great investment in time, money and effort in the mediational training programs but it offers a good complement to the usual standardized, normative assessment procedure.

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